

A Brief History of Watergate Bay



Photo: BEN ROWE

The complete beach lifestyle experience

Set on its own spectacular surfing beach on the North Cornwall coast, The Hotel & Extreme Academy, Watergate Bay is rapidly gaining a reputation as one of the 'must visit' coastal destinations in the UK. Laid-back living and great places to eat and drink mix with exhilarating beach sports, in a distillation of the best the country has to offer.

The original business

John and Mary Ashworth bought the Watergate Bay Hotel in 1967, initially running it as self-catering flats. Built in 1904, the property was originally intended to serve as a railway terminus hotel for a proposed Newquay to Padstow branch line. During the Second World War, it became an RAF Officers Mess and was later converted into married quarters, but fell into disrepair during the 1960s.

The Ashworths converted the premises back to a 55 bedroom hotel in 1971, adding an extension to include a living area and restaurant. It was successfully run as a seasonal family hotel for the traditional bucket-and-spade holiday.

The Extreme Academy is born

In 1999 John and Mary's son, Henry Ashworth, bought the beach café and opened the Extreme Academy. Henry's vision was to create a "ski resort on a beach" - to make Watergate Bay a place where people could be active and get amongst the elements one minute, and relax and eat well the next. Watergate Bay's original beach complex of café and shop was converted into The Beach Hut Bistro & Bar and The Extreme Store, a clothing and equipment shop. The Extreme Academy's sports schools transformed the beach into a mixture of classroom, playground and the wild outdoors, offering lessons for people who wanted to try new sports or improve their skills.

A £500,000 rebuild of the beach complex added a second storey in 2002, creating an upstairs bistro, an upper floor to the shop and facilities for hosting sporting events. The waves of Watergate Bay have hosted surfing competitions since the 1960s; more recently the beach has seen top-level kitesurf events, Zapcat surf powerboat racing, and in 2007 the first ever polo match to be played on a UK beach.

The Extreme Academy has also pioneered a series of firsts in kitesurfing, setting up the country's first kitesurf school and becoming the first UK venue to host an event on the PKRA world kitesurfing tour.

In 2005 world champion waveskier Carl Coombes joined as Sports Manager. Since then Carl has increased the portfolio of sports taught at the Extreme Academy, adding waveski and stand-up paddlesurf to the original portfolio of surfing, mountainboard, kitesurf and traction-kiting.

The Extreme Academy continues to support athletes through sponsorship, including two UK Pro Surf Tour champions, Harry Timson and Chris Thomson, as well as world record breaking kitesurfer Andrey Wharry.



Above: Watergate Bay and the hotel, 1915.



Above: Zapcats racing at the Extreme Academy. Photo: LEE WHITEHEAD

Below: BKSA Kitesurfing competition. Photo: DAVID SIMS





The Beach Hut

The Beach Hut is well known as one of Cornwall's best beach-side hang-outs and a great place to eat. The Beach Hut provides fresh, simply cooked bistro food in an outstanding location. Lazy lunches, cosy evenings, extremely amazing hot chocolates, a great menu and sunsets to rival anywhere in the world. In 2002, *The Observer* listed The Beach Hut as one of the top five beach restaurants in the world, and in 2005 it was voted 'Best for Kids' in the South West in *The Observer Food Magazine* awards.



Above: The Living Space. Photo: BOB BERRY

Below: One of The Hotel's new bedrooms. Photo: BEN ROWE



The hotel redevelopment

By 2001, the hotel found itself competing in a difficult and ever-declining market, and the decision was taken to re-position the hotel, targeting a new generation of young, affluent visitors to Cornwall, mostly on short breaks. A key part of this strategy was to open the hotel year round. In 2004 Will Ashworth, then aged 28, took over the running of the hotel from his parents, John and Mary. The same year, the hotel embarked upon a three phase £3.5 million redevelopment.

Phase one saw the building of a new wing of 18 sea-view rooms of contemporary design, all with balconies giving spectacular views across the bay. In early 2005 the refurbishment of the hotel's public areas was completed, with the restaurant becoming the chic Brasserie, and the creation of the contemporary 'Living Space'. Then in winter 2006 work began on remodelling the bedrooms in the original Victorian part of the hotel. The thirty new rooms were completed for the 2007 season, bringing the English beachside holiday experience into the 21st century with a look that combines reclaimed solid oak floors and white painted tongue and groove bedsteads with funky modern table lamps, reproduction bakelite telephones and original artwork. The latest vibrant wallpaper and fabric designs from Osborne & Little and Designers Guild sit alongside traditional beach stripes to provide a contemporary twist on the traditional Cornish seaside look. The modern technology that you'd expect from a world class hotel is there too, including plasma screen televisions and MP3 docking stations.



The businesses merge

In 2005 the Watergate Bay Hotel merged with the Extreme Academy to create a unique beach lifestyle destination. Renamed The Hotel & Extreme Academy, Watergate Bay, the business today employs 90 full-time staff and a further 50 seasonal employees. Staying true to Will and Henry's original vision of creating a 'ski resort on a beach', the newly merged business offered guests the facilities to play sports on the beach; learn to surf, waveski, traction kite or kitesurf; eat at a selection of restaurants; sleep in contemporary beach house style accommodation; shop for the latest surf gear and accessories; or simply soak up the atmosphere.



Fifteen Cornwall

In May 2006 Fifteen Cornwall, the Jamie Oliver-inspired restaurant, opened at Watergate Bay. Taking over the top floor of the Extreme Academy building on the beach, the restaurant quickly became one of Cornwall's essential dining destinations.



Above: Dining tables and open kitchen at Fifteen Cornwall. Photo: SAM MORGAN MOORE

The restaurant is dedicated to the same inspirational social enterprise goals set out by Jamie Oliver and the team at Fifteen London. Each year the restaurant gives up to 20 trainee chefs a unique opportunity to turn their lives around. All profits from Fifteen Cornwall go to the registered charity, the Cornwall Foundation of Promise. The charity's purpose is the creation of fantastic career opportunities for disadvantaged, local, young people. Henry and Will were instrumental in bringing Fifteen Cornwall to Watergate Bay; Henry is one of the trustees of the Cornwall Foundation of Promise, whilst Will is one of the directors of Fifteen Cornwall. The project has received more than £1 million in grants from Objective One and the South West Regional Development Agency.

Beach Retreats

2006 saw the launch of Beach Retreats, a marketing and letting agency for coastal self-catering accommodation. Each property that joins the Beach Retreats portfolio has met exacting standards. Whether it's a stunning contemporary apartment or a beautiful character cottage, all properties are located close to the best beaches on the South West coastline, surrounded by great places to eat, play, shop and relax. They all have stylish, well designed interiors, and are equipped to a very high standard. Beach Retreats manages the lettings for the business's own self-catering accommodation, as well as offering a complete marketing and letting service for privately-owned properties.

2007 success

Watergate Bay won four South West Tourism Excellence Awards for 2007/2008. The Hotel & Extreme Academy won gold in the 'Large Hotel' and 'Best Tourism Experience' categories, while Fifteen Cornwall picked up the gold 'Taste of the South West Award'. The Winner of Winners Award also went to Watergate Bay, recognising the impact on local tourism of The Hotel & Extreme Academy, and Fifteen Cornwall.

The Extreme Academy also saw success at the Cornwall Tourism Awards, winning gold in the category of 'Leisure Pursuit Provider'. The Extreme Academy's team riders had a great year too, with Chris Thomson crowned the UK Pro Surf Tour's longboard champion, and surfer Harry Timson winning the British, English and UK Pro Surf Tour titles in the under 12 division.

The future

The next phase of the redevelopment of The Hotel - an £8 million project to create 27 holiday apartments and new office facilities - won planning approval in autumn 2007. The scheme will see the site of the former sports hall behind The Hotel transformed into 27 holiday apartments and offices. The semi-detached units have been designed to blend into the North Cornish landscape while incorporating the latest thinking in sustainable, energy-efficient design and construction. Designed by the award-winning Architects Design Group, the apartments will far exceed the current Government targets for energy efficiency, and reflect the growing year-round appeal of Watergate Bay. Construction is expected to begin in autumn 2008, with the apartments ready for occupation in spring 2010.

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Above: Extreme Academy team rider Harry Timson. Photo: UK PRO SURF TOUR



Above: Architects drawing of two semi-detached apartments. Image: ADG